

REVIEW

Pianist Solzhenitsyn lives up to famous name

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GAZETTE MUSIC CRITIC

Performance with Montreal Symphony
Charles Dutoit, Conductor
May 16 & 17, 1995

Forgive the aphorism, but a famous last name can be both an advantage and a liability for an artist embarked on an independent career. Many of the people who packed Salle Wilfrid Pelletier last night were doubtless drawn there by the curiosity value of hearing Ignat Solzhenitsyn, son of the famous novelist Alexander, play the piano with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra under Charles Dutoit. Some of them were probably highly suspicious of the whole affair.

Few can have left with any doubts concerning this 22-year-old's technical finesse and artistic poise. There is one contender yet to be heard - pianist Olli Mustonen next week - but Solzhenitsyn will likely be remembered as the most successful concerto soloist of the MSO season.

It did not hurt that he played Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 ("Emperor"), a familiar work that can re-emerge as the towering masterpiece it is if approached with a fresh perspective. Even in the opening cadenzas, Solzhenitsyn impressed with his clear projection, smooth mastery of dynamic levels and - most important - keen awareness of the music's heroic spirit.

Intimate passages also were given full value, and right-hand decorations in all three movements were realized with the utmost softness and beauty of tone. Yet there was never any pushing for dramatic effect. The manner was consistently patrician.

Dutoit and the orchestra supplied a lively and finely-tooled accompaniment, a couple of minor horn bloopers giving no real cause for complaint. After intermission, they revived Borodin's Symphony No. 2, a spirited if somewhat superficial exercise in classical form and nationalistic content. Dutoit, that master of the Franco-Russian axis, made it seem fresh and brilliantly lit in the Gallic manner, yet he allowed the wind players the freedom they needed to extract distinction from their solos and ensembles.

The concert concluded even more effervescently with Enesco's Romanian Rhapsody No. 1. Conductor and orchestra found all of its charm and infectious verve. Robert Crowley, sitting in the principal chair all night, was the excellent clarinet soloist.

All it would have taken to make this an admirable concert in every respect was the successful premiere of a work commissioned by the MSO from the Canadian composer Rodney Sharman. Unfortunately, this Westerner offered us a dull and simplistic hybrid of minimalist and impressionist impulses, based on a wan woodwind figure scarcely worth hearing once, let alone repeated ad nauseam. No need to rush your coffee to hear the beginning of tonight's repeat, which is also broadcast live on 100.7 FM.